

HELPS
FOR
STUDENTS
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SERIES

98

LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING

origins and development



Colin G. Pooley

The Historical Association

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Colin G. Pooley

Published by
The Historical Association
59a Kennington Park Road
London SE11 4JH

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Edited by
Clive H. Knowles

Origination and Layout by
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ISBN 0 85278-400-7

Published by The Historical Association,
59a Kennington Park Rd, London SE11 4JH
and printed in Great Britain by Blackmore
Press, Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset
SP7 8PX

Front cover illustration shows St Andrew's Gardens: a typical example of the five-storey tenements erected on slum clearance sites in central Liverpool under the 1930 Housing Act.

Back cover shows South Hill Road and Beloe Street tenements (1928-31), in the Dingle area of Liverpool which provided some 267 units for tenants displaced by slum-clearance systems.

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Contents

Introduction: concepts of social housing	5	Sources and questions for the study of local authority housing since 1945	25
Local authority intervention in housing before 1919	7	References	32
Council housing between the wars	12	Selected further reading	37
Local authority housing since 1945	19	Appendix	39

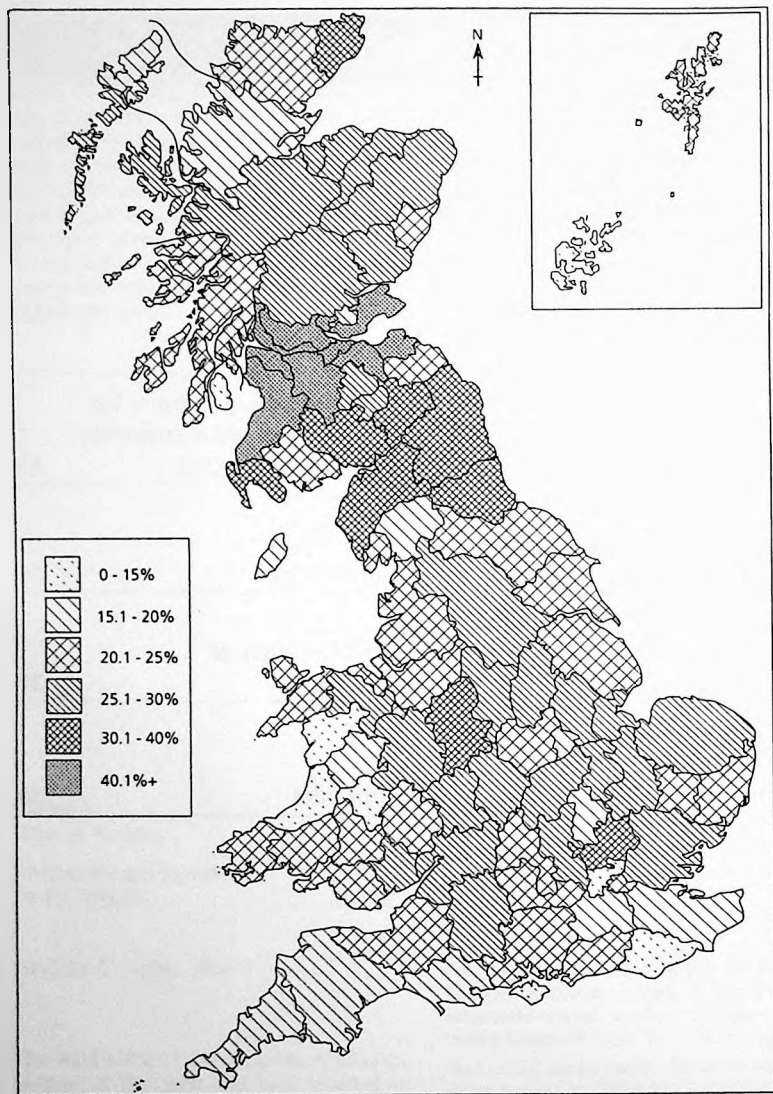


Figure 1: the percentage of households living in local authority housing in Britain in 1961 (by county).

Source: Census of England and Wales, 1961; Census of Scotland, 1961.

The 1961 census was the first to collect data on housing tenure.

Introduction: concepts of social housing

Most people in Britain take for granted the fact that some housing is provided and managed by local authorities. Such housing is regarded in a variety of ways. For some it provides a secure and valued home, for others it is perceived as problem housing which may be ripe for demolition, for sale into the private sector or transfer to a housing association prior to refurbishment. Underlying this housing provision has been an assumption that the private housing market cannot provide adequate housing for all, and that a degree of state intervention is required to ensure the provision of housing for low-income families.

Britain is not unique in the development of state intervention in housing. The forces which led to the provision of council (corporation) housing in Britain from the late-nineteenth century, also led to housing intervention in most of Europe.¹ Such social housing has three main common characteristics. It is housing not primarily provided for profit, it is usually allocated on the basis of need rather than ability to pay, and political decisions rather than market forces determine how much housing is built and the level of state subsidy.² However, the ways in which social housing is provided vary considerably from country to country. Until relatively recently Britain and Ireland were somewhat unusual in that most social housing was provided directly by local authorities, the lowest tier of local government which has housing responsibilities, who themselves owned land, built houses, allocated tenants and managed estates. There was thus total control of social housing by

the local authority, subject to central government financial constraints and legislation.³ In contrast, most social housing in much of the rest of Europe has been provided less directly. Typically, social housing was built and owned by a variety of non-profit landlords, including housing companies and individuals. Registered non-profit companies were eligible for state subsidies, but there was no monolithic state or local authority control. Local municipalities could, however, be involved in housing management or even form their own housing companies. Although British local authorities still own a large proportion of the country's social housing stock, over the past two decades much new social housing has been provided by Housing Associations.⁴ In this respect Britain has become more like other European countries.

There are many other similarities in the development of social housing in European countries. Most have gone through a three phase cycle of change involving a period of initial limited intervention, a period of mass expansion of social housing and, most recently, a phase of partial withdrawal from the provision of social housing.⁵ In Britain these phases are reflected in the pattern of tenure change in the twentieth century (Table 1). On the eve of the First World War most people still lived in privately-rented housing and local authority housing formed only around one per cent of the total housing stock. Rapid expansion, especially after the Second World War, led to council housing peaking at 31.5 per cent of the stock in

1981, but by 1991 this had declined to 21.5 per cent. In 1991 Housing Associations provided a further 3.1 per cent of housing. In comparison social housing (provided mainly by a variety of non-profit landlords) accounted (in about 1991) for around 17 per cent of housing stock in France, 21 per cent in Denmark and 13 per cent in the former West Germany.⁶

There are also variations in social housing provision within Britain (Figure 1). Scottish housing provision is distinctive both in form and tenure,⁷ with a much higher proportion of corporation housing than in England and Wales, and throughout Britain council housing is more common in urban than rural areas.⁸ British council housing also takes a variety of forms, related mainly to the date at which it was built and its location. Rural council housing almost invariably consists of small clusters of low-density dwellings, whereas urban local authority housing is mostly found either in large estates of low-rise suburban semi-detached or terraced housing, or in blocks of flats which may be located near the city centre or in peripheral housing estates.

Local Authority housing in Britain cannot be examined without reference to other housing tenures. As shown in Table 1, the cycle of expansion and decline in corporation housing has been matched by a steady decline in the privately-rented sector (especially after 1945), and by the continued growth of home ownership.⁹ Since the 1991 census, rates of home ownership have continued to rise whilst council renting has further declined. These trends obviously reflect a range of economic, social and political circumstances that have developed over the twentieth century but, at their simplest, they characterize the relative attractiveness of different housing forms at particular points in time. Study of the cycle of expansion and contraction in British council housing must

therefore be related to the relative attractiveness of each of the other main housing tenures.

The remainder of this pamphlet examines some of these issues in three time periods: before 1919; the inter-war years; and after 1945. These periods are chosen because they partially reflect policy changes (see below), but also because they reflect broader social and economic trends within society. Moreover, the two world wars also interrupted housing production, led to deterioration of the existing stock, and were followed by periods of acute housing shortage. In each section the main factors of change will be described and explained, the relationship of council housing to other housing tenures examined, the characteristics of council tenants assessed, and the impact of corporation housing on the availability of housing for those in most housing need considered. In the final section, sources for the study of corporation housing are described and related to a series of research questions about the provision of local authority housing.

This pamphlet is directed particularly at those engaged in the local study of corporation housing. Although reference is made to national trends, both the questions posed and the sources discussed are particularly relevant at the local level of study. It can also be argued that it is at this level that more research is needed. There are several good studies of the development of national housing policy,¹⁰ but one thing that studies of particular places have demonstrated is the diversity of local experiences.¹¹ More studies that examine why and how local authority housing was built, that discover who lived in such housing and how it changed their housing conditions, and that investigate the relationship between local and national housing policies and priorities are more than welcome.

Local authority intervention in housing before 1919

For much of the nineteenth century it was widely assumed by politicians and public alike that housing provision should be left to the private market, and that housing improvement would be achieved through the voluntary out-movement of population and the subsequent filtering down of vacated properties to those in most housing need. However, increasing concern about working-class housing conditions, urban poverty and disease focused attention on urban housing in the second half of the nineteenth century. Whilst some debate arose from genuine concern about working-class housing conditions, much was stimulated by self-interest, particularly the fear of infectious disease spreading from overcrowded and insanitary working-class housing into middle-class areas of the city.¹² Such factors stimulated increased local authority intervention in housing, and the period before 1919 was an important precursor to later developments in municipal housing provision.

All British cities had areas of acute housing need, but some of the worst conditions were found in London, Glasgow, Liverpool and Newcastle (Table 2). It is difficult to compare directly census statistics on levels of overcrowding, because no account is taken of the size of rooms. This is particularly problematic for comparisons between Scotland and England due to differences in housing form between the two countries.¹³ Whereas in England and Wales most poor families rented rooms in a multi-occupied house or rented a small terrace property (possibly built back-to-back in a cramped court), in Scotland it was normal for families to rent one or two rooms in a large purpose-built tenement block.

Numbers of persons per room tended to be higher in Scotland but room sizes were also greater. However, despite these problems of comparison, most commentators agree that Scotland, and especially Glasgow, contained some of the worst housing conditions in the country in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁴

Although the framework for local authority intervention in housing was set by national legislation, what actually occurred was primarily influenced by local policies and priorities. National legislation, aimed at improving public health and housing, allowed local authorities to intervene in urban housing, but there was no requirement that any action should be taken (Table 3). Following Chadwick's successful campaigns,¹⁵ much mid-Victorian legislation focused on sanitation and water supply rather than housing *per se*, and although the Torrens Act (1868) and the Cross Act (1875) both included provisions for slum clearance and, in certain circumstances, rebuilding by local authorities, they lacked both the administrative framework and political will to have much effect.¹⁶ The 1890 Housing Act had more impact, but in effect this was a consolidating act which strengthened previous legislation and reacted to actions taken by some local authorities.¹⁷ The local interpretation of national legislation was crucial before 1919.

Local authorities that were persuaded of the need to intervene could take a variety of actions. They could concentrate on the regulation of private building developments, they could become involved in slum clearance, or they could provide corporation housing on slum-clearance sites or in the suburbs. All local authorities enforced some building

regulations from mid-century, usually regulating street width and building height, and controlling such facilities as water supply, sanitation and lighting.¹⁸ Most also engaged in some slum clearance, although this was more controversial in that it cost money which had to be raised through the rates and, not infrequently, ratepayers themselves (including councillors) lost income through slum clearance as slum landlords were not adequately compensated until 1875. Increased levels of compensation in turn increased the cost of slum clearance, whilst many Medical Officers of Health opposed slum-clearance schemes on the grounds that there was nowhere else for displaced tenants to go. Therefore the housing problems of the poor were exacerbated.¹⁹

Most councillors continued to argue that rebuilding following slum clearance, and the provision of new suburban homes, should remain the responsibility of private enterprise. However a minority of, usually Liberal, councillors often lobbied by clergy, medical men and others who came in direct contact with the slums, increasingly argued from the 1860s that councils should take more direct responsibility for housing provision. They demonstrated that new private housing was too expensive for most working-class families, that inner-city sites were often left undeveloped — or were taken for commercial uses — because inner-city housing was not an attractive investment for private builders, and that suburban housing was too expensive and too distant from the main sites of employment for most low-income families.

Some local authorities, notably those with the worst housing problems, did respond by providing corporation housing. London, Liverpool and Glasgow each constructed substantial numbers of corporation properties before 1919 and in total some 179 local authorities had obtained sanctions for loans from the Public Works Loan Commissioners to build houses prior to 1914.²⁰ However

the 2,895 units constructed by Liverpool Corporation between 1869 and 1919 were atypical. More representative were the 42 municipal flats constructed in Leicester before the First World War,²¹ whilst a small county town like Lancaster built no council housing before 1919.²² Council house building in rural areas was also very sparse with only 470 municipal cottages constructed by rural councils prior to World War One.²³

In almost all urban municipalities slum clearance ran ahead of corporation rebuilding, and in some cases it exceeded all house construction (by local authorities and private enterprise). The net effect of housing intervention was to reduce the total stock of low-cost housing. Even in a city such as Liverpool,²⁴ which constructed more municipal dwellings than most corporations, fewer than one fifth of demolished houses were replaced by local authority schemes before 1919 (Table 4). In addition, slum clearance schemes did not always tackle the worst housing problems. In London, Yelling has shown that slum clearance sites before 1919 were as likely to be selected for their ease of acquisition and convenience of development, as for the seriousness of their housing problems.²⁵

Although prior to 1919 there were no restrictions on the type of housing built by local authorities, in practice most experienced the same constraints (though not necessarily in the same way or to the same degree) and therefore they tended to build housing which was essentially similar. The first constraint was financial. Because all construction had to be funded by loans from the Public Works Loan Commissioners, which were set against the rates, costs had to be kept to a minimum. In most schemes both loan repayments and running costs were intended to be recouped from rent income. However, in practice many schemes which were meant to cover their own costs were in effect subsidised through the rates.

There were also locational constraints. Although suburban sites were favoured by Medical Officers for health reasons, and land could be acquired at relatively low cost, most urban corporations initially preferred to build on slum-clearance sites near the city centre. The main argument in favour of this policy was the need to provide low-cost housing close to places of work which were still mainly central in the nineteenth century. Councillors opposed to the principle of local authority intervention in housing could also begin to justify such a policy by arguing that private enterprise was less interested in inner-city sites, and therefore the corporation was not competing with private business. City centre councillors were also keen to retain population in the inner residential districts as it was good for businesses in their wards, and therefore they too supported inner-city housing. In Britain, only London initially invested substantially in suburban council housing schemes, due mainly to the very high cost of central sites in the metropolis, although the relative merits of central city and suburban building were hotly debated in many towns. By the turn of the century other authorities, including Manchester, Sheffield and Glasgow were using cheaper sites away from the city centre.

There were also engineering constraints on the construction of corporation housing. Although most councils were keen to house as many families as cheaply as possible, and thus building high and using new low-cost construction techniques were intrinsically attractive, there remained severe limitations to what could be achieved. High-rise construction pioneered in the USA did not really penetrate Britain before the First World War, and although there were experiments with new concrete construction (for instance in Liverpool), most homes were provided using conventional building methods.

One result of these factors was that, with the exception of some London schemes, most pre-1919 corporation housing took the form of high-density flats built on central slum-clearance sites using conventional building techniques. Most tenement blocks were no more than five storeys high but, in order to cut costs, rooms were small and facilities limited. Thus in Liverpool some tenements constructed in the 1890s had shared kitchen and toilet facilities and no hot water supply. The flats were much better than the slums that had been demolished, but most were not luxurious. Whilst tenements were a common housing form in Scotland, and Glasgow's corporation tenements were not dissimilar to private housing being built at the same time, in England most artisans' dwellings were quite different from property provided by private enterprise. The dwellings were not necessarily architecturally unattractive (Plate 1), indeed several schemes won architectural awards and in London the Boundary Street scheme was particularly spacious, but they were distinctive and therefore easily identified as corporation dwellings for the poor.

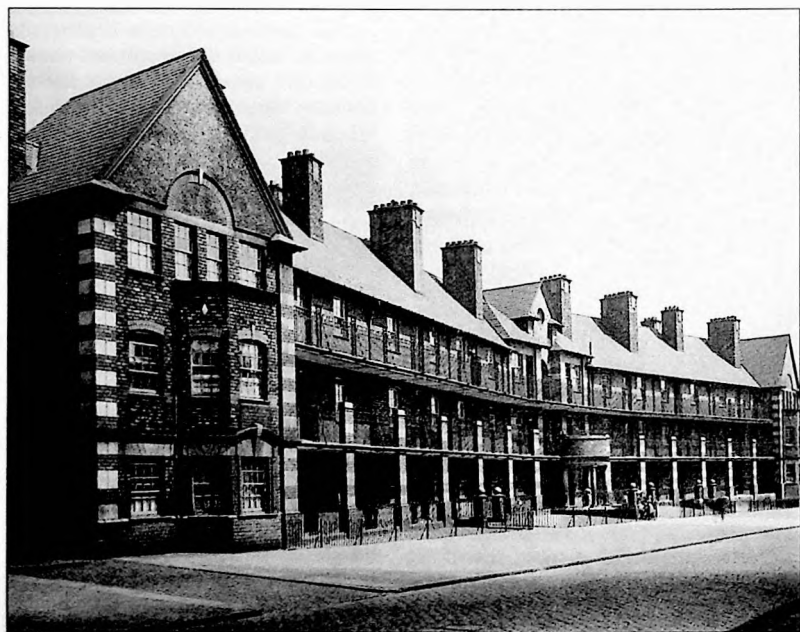
Relatively few studies have systematically analysed the characteristics of tenants in early local authority housing schemes, and this is an area ripe for further local research. Moreover, there is a tendency to base comments about the ways in which housing was allocated, and the classes of population for which it was intended, on statements made by councillors and housing managers. However, there were often substantial differences between the claims of proponents of corporation housing and the experiences of those actually housed.

Because of the requirement to cover all costs and repay loans, local authorities were

in effect required to behave in much the same way as private landlords. Rents had to be set at levels that would give returns of around four per cent and tenants had to be selected accordingly. Although local authorities paid lip service to the claim that they were accommodating those in most housing need, in practice commercial considerations applied. Managers were required to select tenants who could afford the rent, who would pay it regularly, and who would conform to the styles of life that the corporation was trying to establish in its new dwellings.

Typically rents in corporation dwellings were higher than those paid for one or two rooms

in the private sector. The standard of accommodation was higher, but this was scant comfort to a family on a low and irregular wage. Thus in Birmingham rents in the Ryder Street scheme were set at 5s. to 7s. a week in an area where the average working-class rent was 3s. 6d., and in Liverpool rents for the Nash Grove flats were from 2s. 3d. to 5s. 6d. where the working-class average was just 1s. 9d in the 1890s.²⁶ Early corporation housing was thus rationed by both income and life-style, with those in most housing need forced to pay high rents to private landlords for inferior property in the slums. Like philanthropic housing associations, which operated mainly in London, local authorities were constrained



by market forces and were unable to provide housing for the very poor.

A detailed study of early corporation housing in Liverpool illustrates these points.²⁷ Although flats built by Liverpool City council in the city centre after 1895 were restricted to those dispossessed by the slum-clearance actions of the corporation, or those prosecuted for overcrowding or for illegal occupation of a cellar, the new property was not used to house those in most housing need. This was recognised by some contemporary commentators, particularly concerned Catholic clergy. In 1913 one commented 'The poorest poor who had to clear out of condemned houses do not seem to have got into any new corporation houses anywhere. As far as I have been able to trace them they have managed to get into other houses of a similar nature to those that have been condemned'.²⁸ This result was not surprising given that instructions to the Superintendent of Dwellings were to take 'all reasonable precautions to secure tenants who are of good character and likely to pay their rent punctually'²⁹ or, as the Liverpool Medical Officer put it 'a selection of the better class of dispossessed is being made'.³⁰

Despite these restrictions, Liverpool's early corporation housing did provide reasonable accommodation for many working-class families who had previously been living in the slums. As councillors claimed, families rehoused came almost exclusively from the

immediate locality which had been subject to slum clearance, and the tenants of corporation flats had a wide range of working-class occupations (Table 5). However, even those that did gain access to the flats were under constant scrutiny. The Superintendent of Dwellings enforced strict management practices and anyone who regularly failed to pay rent, or who did not conform to the council's view of a good tenant, either left of their own accord or was evicted. This is demonstrated by the very high turnover rate in some dwellings in the years immediately after their construction.

The basic problem that was faced in Liverpool and elsewhere was the poverty of a large proportion of the population. This was especially true in cities such as Glasgow, London and Liverpool which had a large casual labour force.³¹ Before 1919 council dwellings received no central government subsidy (though many schemes were almost certainly subsidised through the rates) and they were designed not to compete directly with private enterprise. Consequently they were provided in a manner which meant that they could not accommodate the very poor. Liverpool corporation recognized this after 1905 when their more expensive blocks were gradually de-restricted and made available to anyone who could pay the rents. Despite a massive housing shortage, there were insufficient families dispossessed from slum-clearance schemes or living in overcrowded housing, who could afford the corporation rents. Those families that did live in council housing often sub-let part of their flat to cover the rent, leading to increasing problems of overcrowding in corporation property.

Plate 1: Municipal housing in Liverpool before 1919: Burlington Street Dwellings. This block of Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings, built in 1910 and containing 114 flats, was typical of those erected in central areas of Liverpool prior to 1919.

Council housing between the wars

The Housing Act of 1919 (Addison Act) is often seen as a watershed in the provision of corporation housing in Britain, but the factors which led to this legislation can be traced back to the late-nineteenth century. It should be remembered that specific pieces of legislation do not themselves have significance. They are important only in that they represent the outcome of trends and debates in society and economy which have developed over a long period of time. As with early council house provision, the factors which led to the passing of the 1919 Act reflect the interplay of national and local forces, with the balance of contemporary debate varying from place to place.³²

From the 1880s a number of factors had conspired to place housing issues at the centre of the political arena. Increased concern about inner-city living conditions, associated disease and the unhealthy state of the population (highlighted during the recruitment of soldiers for the Boer war) meant that housing condition could not be ignored. In some localities housing poverty was of central importance. Most notably, in Glasgow housing became the focus of local working-class politics, bringing together socialist and feminist issues, and leading to well-publicized rent strikes in 1915 which had grown out of widespread local tenants' activism. By 1914 some 17 per cent of Glasgow's councillors were Labour, and the local Labour party capitalized on grassroots tenant unrest to make housing a central political issue.³³

At the same time the traditional political and economic power of landlords was being eroded.³⁴ Widening of the franchise and the growth of Labour politics meant that both central and local government had a broader

electorate to appease, and concern about war-time rent levels led to the imposition of rent controls in 1915. Ideologically, as much as economically, this was a blow to the traditional landlord class. However, Victorian faith in the supremacy of the private market was not easily eroded, and most politicians clung to their conviction that housing for all could be provided by private enterprise. Prior to the First World War, most political discussion of the housing crisis focused on the 'land question' with Liberals arguing that land prices were too high, thus inflating the cost of new housing, and Conservatives calling for a shift in taxation away from property to stimulate the private market by increasing the profitability of private renting.³⁵

Housing conditions, particularly in the cities, were further worsened by the downturn in the building industry in the early-twentieth century, exacerbated during war-time, and by the need to meet the housing demands of returning soldiers and an increased rate of household formation after 1918. The legislation of 1919 was thus the outcome of a series of long-run trends from the 1880s, together with the particular circumstances which pertained at the end of the First World War. Political intervention in the housing market was seen to be expedient to meet the housing crisis which was affecting an increasingly large sector of the population (including the skilled working class and not just the casual poor), and as a political strategy to deflect the growing labour movement and potential working-class revolution.

The 1919 Housing Act, passed by the Liberal Government of Lloyd George, was the start of large-scale central government

intervention in housing production. However, in the eyes of most politicians this was seen at the time as a temporary expedient. Particular circumstances had conspired to make intervention necessary, but it was widely assumed (and argued by most supporters of the bill) that housing provision would return to the private sphere when the post-war housing crisis had been averted. The Addison Act was in effect passed as a temporary measure to provide good quality subsidized housing for the deserving poor at a time when private builders could not meet this demand. When the British economy recovered from the effects of war it was assumed that private builders would resume responsibility for working-class housing.³⁶

Municipal intervention in the housing market has taken two main forms. Prior to 1919 all intervention was based on the need to clear insanitary slum housing and to provide low-cost accommodation for those displaced (even if this aim was never fully attained). The 1919 Act, which required all local authorities to survey housing need and to make plans for the provision of municipal housing which was built with a central-government subsidy, instituted the provision of general-needs housing which was designed primarily for the skilled working class (though in practice some 30 per cent of Local Authorities built no housing under the 1919 act).³⁷ It was assumed that the poor would be helped through housing vacated by the better-off filtering down to those in most housing need. Although some slum clearance took place in the 1920s, for much of this period the main emphasis was on the provision of general-needs housing. In the 1930s housing policy focused mainly on slum clearance, but following the Second World War general-needs housing was again dominant. This continued until the 1950s when slum-clearance again became a priority. These phases have been characterized by Harloe³⁸ as the 'residual' model, which dominated under normal con-

ditions, and the 'mass' model which was characteristic of periods of social and economic disruption in the housing market, such as the periods after the two world wars.

The initial high cost to the Exchequer of the open-ended 1919 subsidy, together with a change in government, led to the Conservative administration of 1923 severely restricting the level of subsidy to municipal housing. This was partially restored by the first Labour administration in 1924 (Table 3) and subsidised general-needs provision continued until 1933. The 1930 Housing Act required local authorities to focus increasingly on slum-clearance in the city centre with subsidized rehousing provided for those displaced either in the suburbs or the inner city. It was assumed that private enterprise would provide all general-needs housing after 1933, although local authorities could continue to build unsubsidized general-needs housing if they wished and in 1935 a new subsidy for the relief of overcrowding was introduced. Thus, during the 1930s corporation housing was increasingly residualized and clearly labelled as being for the very poor. The 1935 Housing Act also introduced additional subsidies for the construction of flats for those displaced due to overcrowding or slum-clearance. Distinctive city-centre corporation flats further distinguished local authority accommodation from private housing provision.

Despite national legislation, the finance of corporation housebuilding programmes after 1919 was not straightforward, and there were considerable variations in the abilities of local authorities to raise the relevant finance.³⁹ Before land could be purchased and construction begin, a local council had to seek the approval of the Ministry of Health to raise a loan to cover the capital cost of the project. Loans could either be obtained through the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) or from the private

sector. The PWLB could lend at slightly below market interest levels, but local authorities had to convince the PWLB that they could not raise money on the financial markets, and that there was sufficient security against the rates. An existing high rate, or any suspected irregularities, could lead to the application being turned down. Although small loans could come from private individuals, the main source of private capital for corporation housebuilding came from banks, building societies and other financial institutions. A society such as the Bradford 2nd Equitable Building Society provided loans to corporations as dispersed as Middlesbrough, Aberdare, Heysham, Huddersfield, West Ham and Worthing in 1922 for house building, road construction and other projects.⁴⁰ Although most

financial institutions had a surfeit of capital to invest during much of the inter-war period, they took care to loan to local authorities which gave a high degree of security. In particular, councils in depressed areas such as the North East, with high levels of rent and rate arrears, initially found it difficult to convince either the PWLB or private institutions to make substantial loans in the 1920s.⁴¹

The net cost to the community of an inter-war housing scheme varied considerably from place to place and over time. The cost was affected by the price and availability of suitable land, by the scale of the scheme, by changing building costs (which halved during the 1920s), by the determination of rent levels, and by the amount of central



Plate 2: Suburban municipal housing in Liverpool in the 1920s: Curtis Road. These semi-detached houses built in 1920 of coloured concrete blocks, were typical of the good quality, low-density parlour (5 room) houses erected on the Walton Clubmoor estate under the 1919 Housing Act.

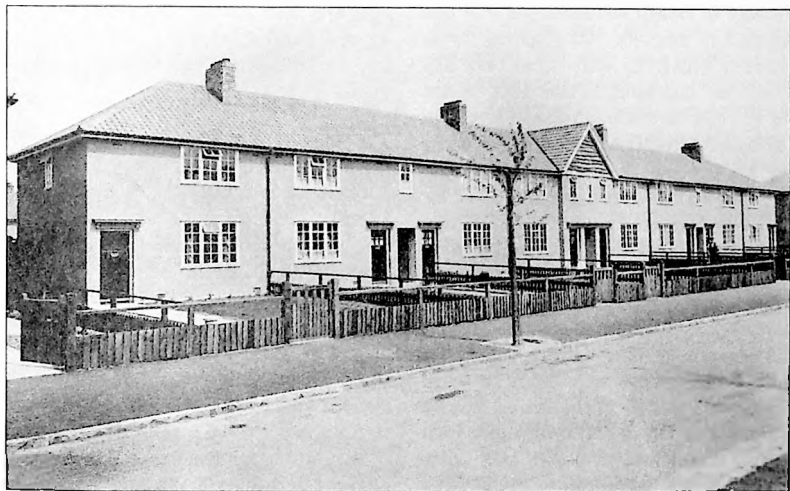


Plate 3: Suburban municipal housing in Liverpool in the 1920s: Berkeswell Road. This block of eight houses built in 1928 on the Norris Green estate was typical of those built to reduced specifications in the later 1920s.

government subsidy. The 1919 Act was almost open-ended and allowed for the total annual loss of a council scheme, less the contribution of a penny rate, to be charged to the Exchequer. In contrast, the 1923 Housing Act provided a subsidy of only £6 per council house per year for 20 years, the 1924 Act raised this to £9 for 40 years, and the 1930 Act provided a subsidy of £2 5s. per person rehoused in a slum-clearance scheme over a period of 40 years. The interaction of these various factors, linked to the rateable value of the district, led to large variations in the cost imposed on ratepayers in different areas. Thus in County Durham the cost to ratepayers of various housing schemes varied from 2s. in the pound to only 2d. in the pound by the late 1930s.⁴²

The planning and design of inter-war council housing was heavily influenced by central directives, thus minimizing stylistic differences between council estates in

different parts of the country. The government report of 1918, chaired by John Tudor Walters, set the framework for most local authority development between the wars, although the high standards envisaged in the report, and initially embraced in 1919, were gradually reduced as cost considerations became paramount. The Tudor Walters report drew heavily on the ideas of the garden city movement, combining well-built and spacious homes with attractively laid-out, low-density developments.⁴³ Most properties were semi-detached or in short terraces, and consisted of three bedrooms and one or two living rooms, kitchen, bathroom and water closet. After the acts of 1923 and 1924 space and amenities were reduced, but the houses continued to provide good quality accommodation (Plates 2 and 3).

Following the 1930 Housing Act, with its emphasis on slum clearance and provision for the poor, there were pressures from the

Ministry of Health to reduce the size and standard of property. For instance, three-bedroom properties were often only 620 square feet compared to over 1000 square feet in 1919. In this way residual provision was distinguished from general-needs housing for the better off, although some corporations did recognize the need for more four bedroom houses to cater for large families displaced from the slums. After 1935 an increasing proportion of council property in the large cities consisted of five-storey blocks of flats, especially in Glasgow, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester and London. These were often modelled directly on schemes in continental Europe (for instance Vienna). They provided high quality accommodation, but with some communal facilities (laundries, play facilities

etc.) they were seen as deliberately encouraging socialist styles of living in what many saw as forbidding high-density developments (Plate 4).⁴⁴

The location of inter-war council developments was influenced both by central government directives and by local factors affecting the price and availability of land. The garden city movement gave great emphasis to the health benefits of suburban living, and the low-density development dictated by central government meant that almost all general-needs building was in the suburbs. Suburban land was much cheaper than central sites, but even so local circumstances could greatly affect the cost of land and hence the financial viability of schemes. Some far-sighted councils



(including Liverpool) had begun acquiring suburban sites before the 1919 Act was passed, but where one or two local owners controlled the only suitable land, prices could be forced upwards. Thus in County Durham the purchase price of suburban land routinely ranged from less than £100 to over £300 per acre.⁴⁵ In many settlements corporations were buying land outside their administrative district and, especially in large towns, many estates were remote from centrally-located employment and facilities. In smaller towns this was not a problem as even suburban estates were within easy walking distance of most amenities.

In the 1920s central area slum clearance and redevelopment was confined to relatively small schemes in large cities. This was due to a combination of central government policy and the high cost of central land. For instance in Liverpool there was continuing concern that suburban council housing could not solve the city's housing problems — it was too expensive and too distant from the main areas of employment on the docks — and there were a number of attempts to continue to build in the city centre. In total Liverpool Corporation built 744 units in flats on central sites in the 1920s (compared to 19,397 suburban houses by the end of 1930), but many of these schemes were left over from proposals approved prior to the 1914-18 war. The only substantial new schemes were on two sites by the south docks where some 458 units were erected on land previously used for warehousing. These were used

to decant tenants from slum clearance areas so that further sites could eventually be redeveloped. This took place under the 1930 Act which refocused attention on slum clearance.⁴⁶ As usual the Scottish experience was slightly different. Although even in Glasgow a majority of the 21,939 corporation houses built 1919-29 were low-density and suburban, some 27 per cent were constructed in the traditional tenement style designed to rehouse families displaced from the Glasgow slums.⁴⁷

Although the worst housing problems occurred in urban areas, especially the big cities, council house building also took place in rural areas. However, most rural district councils were relatively slow to develop schemes, with the most active authorities in industrialised rural areas (such as County Durham) and in districts close to expanding towns. Overall some 134,000 municipal dwellings were constructed in rural areas 1919-30 (18 per cent of total new building), mostly forming small clusters of low-density houses for farm workers.⁴⁸ Overall in England and Wales local authorities provided 27.8 per cent of new houses 1919-41 (compared to 70.0 per cent in Scotland), but there were big variations between towns. For instance in Liverpool the corporation provided around three quarters of new units, in Manchester private and public provision was about equal, in Lancaster local authority provision was about one third of the total and in London it was one fifth.⁴⁹

There are many more studies of the development of housing policy in the inter-war years than there are of housing management or, especially, of the characteristics of tenants. Evidence from Leeds, Liverpool, Nottingham and other towns suggests that there were both similarities and differences

Plate 4: Municipal tenements in Liverpool in the 1930s: St Andrew's Gardens. This block of 346 flats built in 1935 was typical of the five-storey tenements erected on slum clearance sites in central Liverpool under the 1930 Housing Act.

in housing management between places.⁵⁰ Rent levels for council houses varied markedly over time and between towns. Due to their high construction costs rents for suburban houses built under the 1919 Act were high (between 13s. and 17s. 9d. per week inclusive of rates in Liverpool in 1923) and consequently they were occupied by those on relatively high incomes.⁵¹ These houses were never designed for those in most housing need: many tenants were from the skilled working class or above, they had secure incomes and usually moved from districts of the city which already contained reasonable-quality housing. The selective nature of housing allocation in the early 1920s is a common feature in most towns, although in some smaller settlements such as Carlisle municipal housing was allocated to a wider range of social groups, and in Ashington (Northumberland) more poor families got council housing because regularly-employed miners already had company housing.⁵²

Rents for houses built under the 1924 Housing Act were generally lower, a 1926 survey revealed rents ranging from 16s 6d. in London to 6s. 6d. in Bristol, but in most cases suburban housing remained the preserve of the more affluent. Although most councils made some commitment to allocate housing to those in most need, and some had maximum income levels, in practice ability to pay rent was a crucial factor. In addition the peripheral location of most estates meant that in large towns many families could not live there and continue to work in the city centre. In the 1930s councils could introduce rent subsidy schemes (under the 1930 Housing Act), but by 1938 there were only 112 such schemes (implemented by just 10 per cent of local authorities). Corporations varied greatly in how they handled rents. Liverpool

maintained relatively high rents, with no subsidy scheme, although the corporation did take a lenient attitude towards rent arrears in the 1930s. In Lancaster rent rebates went to all on low incomes, but in Manchester only slum-clearance tenants were eligible. In some cities the schemes were controversial, leading to a rent strike in Birmingham and contributing to the fall of the Labour council in Leeds.⁵³

Following the 1930 Housing Act councils had to rehouse families dispossessed from slum-clearance schemes and thus rents were generally set at much lower levels. In Liverpool standard rents for flats built in the 1930s ranged from 3s 7d. for a bed-living room to 10s. 6d. for a 5 bedroom flat. Consequently these units accommodated a much wider range of social groups (Table 6), and for the first time local authorities were providing homes for those in most housing need. However, even in the 1930s not all those in housing poverty were accommodated. Rents were still too high for some, others were put off by oppressive corporation housing management — in Liverpool women housing managers were employed to inspect property and instruct tenants in what the corporation deemed to be good housekeeping — and others were missed because they happened not to live in slum-clearance areas. Where rehousing occurred in peripheral estates rather than central tenements the high costs of commuting to work often forced tenants to move to cheaper and more convenient accommodation. This was a particular problem for many tenants during the depression, as even those who had previously enjoyed good incomes found it difficult to pay suburban rents, and a high proportion of new allocations were to existing corporation tenants moving to cheaper property elsewhere in the corporation stock.⁵⁴

Local authority housing since 1945

Although the Second World War provided a temporary halt to corporation building, many of the themes established prior to 1939 continued after the end of hostilities. However, there were also substantial new factors to be taken into account, most significantly the election in 1945 of the first Labour government with a mandate for substantial change. Housing policy was central to the welfare reforms in the Labour manifesto, and in a survey carried out at the time of the 1945 election some 41 per cent of the electorate sampled stated that housing was the most important issue for them, well ahead of full employment. Aneurin Bevan, as Minister of Health, was responsible for the development of Labour's housing programme which focused heavily on local authority involvement rather than the revitalization of the private sector. This almost total reliance on municipal housing provision was largely due to the strong personal commitment of Bevan to council housing, and was a policy which was criticised by Conservatives and some Labour politicians.⁵⁵

The housing problem facing Britain in 1945 was immense.⁵⁶ Despite inter-war housing programmes much housing poverty remained in 1939. To this was added the effect of air raid damage, especially severe in London and some of the industrial cities which already had the worst housing problems, an increased rate of family formation as soldiers returned from the war, and rising working-class expectations as the electorate waited for Labour's promises to be delivered. In 1945 it was estimated (by the Conservative Government) that some 750,000 new homes were required immediately in England and Wales to

provide all families with separate accommodation. In fact, the decade after 1945 saw the construction of over 1.5 million new local authority homes. This exceeded the number produced in England and Wales between the wars (1.16 million) and was a rate of local authority completion unmatched in later decades. In keeping with the history of housing poverty in Scotland, the problem was even more severe north of the border. In 1944 the Scottish Housing Advisory Committee estimated the housing shortage at over 900,000 homes with an immediate need for almost half a million houses. In the period 1946-55 some 238,484 local authority homes were in fact constructed, amounting to 93 per cent of total new building in Scotland.

Whilst the new Labour government was developing its housing policy (established in the Housing Act of 1946), there were pressing problems to be dealt with at the local level. In most cities there was a backlog of schemes with planning permission and finance that had been interrupted by the war, and the first priority of many councils was to restart pre-war programmes to try to meet immediate housing demand. Thus in Liverpool both inner city tenement construction and the provision of suburban homes for slum-clearance tenants in areas such as the Speke estate continued.⁵⁷ Encouraged by central government, most local authorities also embarked on a programme of short-term repairs to existing property and the rapid construction of temporary prefabricated houses. By 1948 some 125,000 prefabs had been built in England and Wales.



Plate 5: Suburban municipal housing in Liverpool after the Second World War: Mab Lane. These semi-detached houses built on the Cantril Farm estate in 1946 were typical of the good-quality homes erected under the 1946 Housing Act.

Air raid damage also frustrated housing allocation and management. In Liverpool, the large number of families displaced from private homes by bomb damage led the council to use their housing to provide temporary accommodation for these families. This inevitably meant that very few other tenants were accommodated, and it can be suggested that the war-time allocation to corporation tenements of those who preferred to live in the private sector, contributed to some of the criticisms which gave these blocks a bad reputation by the 1940s. Their central location, in areas that were already beginning to experience out-migration and economic decline, combined with the fact that a substantial minority of tenants were keen to move out as soon as better housing was available, led to the

stigmatization of Liverpool's inter-war tenements very early in the post-war period.⁵⁸ This is a theme which has recurred since 1945: relatively new council housing has repeatedly been marginalized and stigmatized contributing to decay of the housing stock, the creation of unsatisfactory homes for council tenants and, eventually, the relative demise of the whole sector.

The 1946 Housing Act increased subsidies for corporation housing to £22 per house per year over 60 years (£16 10s. from the Exchequer and a compulsory £5 10s. from the rates). This represented a substantial increase from the 1939 level (when the maximum subsidy was £8 5s.) mainly reflecting inflated house construction costs after the war. A 3 bedroom house cost on

average £1,045 to construct in 1945 compared to £376 in 1939. The high subsidy was designed both to stimulate the rate of construction and maintain rents at a reasonable level (calculated at 10s. per week on average).⁵⁹ Local Authorities were also allowed to borrow extensively from the Public Works Loan Board at very low interest rates (mostly below 3 per cent), rather than raise finance on the private market, whilst the Land Acquisitions Act of 1946 expedited the purchase of building land by local authorities. However, in most towns land shortage was not a problem as many councils had been buying land ahead of the 1946 Act.

In comparison with houses built in the late 1930s, corporation houses built under the 1946 act were both large and well-constructed.⁶⁰ The Dudley Report of 1944 had recommended high standards in council house design, and these criteria were in fact exceeded under the 1946 Act. In the period 1946-51 3 bedroom council houses were on average 37 per cent larger than similar houses built between 1934 and 1939. Although councils were, in theory, providing housing for those in most need, policy was more akin to the programme established in 1919 than to that of the 1930s (Plate 5). In 1949 the housing programme was further expanded as councils were allowed to again provide general-needs housing, rather than housing for the working classes.

Concern about the high cost of the housing programme was already being expressed in the early 1950s, and plans to reduce the size and standard of council houses were drawn up whilst Labour was still in office (but after Bevan, a major proponent of large-scale council housing, had left the Ministry of Health). These changes were accelerated by the new Conservative government of 1951. The Conservative government was pledged to increase house production in both the private and public sectors and,

initially, increased the output of council houses to unprecedented levels. This was achieved by both increasing subsidies (to £35 12s. per house per year in the 1952 Housing Act) and, especially, by reducing standards so that more units could be built at little extra cost.

However, from 1953 when the manifesto targets of council completions had been attained, much greater emphasis was given to the private sector. This was, in effect, a return to the residual housing policy of the 1930s. Private renting and, especially, owner occupation were encouraged and councils were required to concentrate their attention on slum clearance and rehousing. General-needs provision was again to be the preserve of the private sector. The 1956 Housing Subsidies Act cut subsidies for general-needs housing and increased subsidies for high-rise dwellings linked to slum clearance. As in the 1930s, council housing was again seen as a marginal tenure with distinctive high-rise housing provided for the very poor (Plate 6).

The dominance of home ownership in Britain, and the consequential residualization of council renting which had begun in the 1930s, accelerated rapidly from the 1950s.⁶¹ Both Labour and Conservative administrations have recognized the pre-eminence of owner occupation and have ascribed council renting a subsidiary role in housing provision. There have, however, been some substantial policy changes since the 1950s. The shift of emphasis to high-rise construction from the mid-1950s had a major impact both on the lives of tenants and on the structure of British cities. The desire to reduce costs led to the use of new building techniques which often proved to be unsatisfactory, and many estates were built either on remote low-cost suburban sites or in run-down inner-city areas. In most British cities corporation estates of the 1960s rapidly gained a bad reputation,

Plate 6: High-rise council flats in central Liverpool: Everton Heights. From the mid-1950s many central areas were cleared of slum housing and blocks of council flats erected on the sites. 'The Braddocks', photographed in 1959, were typical of those erected in the Everton area of Liverpool.



and by the 1970s had become hard-to-let and hard-to-live-in.⁶²

In addition to large-scale overspill estates, the process of slum-clearance and re-housing was also linked to the post-war policy of new town development in Britain.⁶³ The scale of population movement was immense and in many cases led to conflict between adjacent local authorities. Thus in Glasgow, a city with some of the worst housing problems in Britain, the Clyde Valley Regional Plan of 1946 proposed the relocation of some 300,000 people in expanded towns and new towns in the wider Glasgow region. Glasgow corporation initially strongly objected to this loss of population, arguing that the new homes could be provided within the city boundaries. However,

the government was committed to a policy of new town development, in which much of the housing was provided by specially-created public sector new town corporations. East Kilbride (1947), Glenrothes (1948) and Cumbernauld (1956) were all established to accommodate Glasgow's overspill population.⁶⁴

In addition to the provision of social housing by local authorities and new town corporations, which occurred throughout Britain, in Scotland a third agency was also involved. The Scottish Special Housing Association had been established in 1937 to provide housing and employment in areas designated for special economic assistance.⁶⁵ Following the 1944 Housing (Scotland) Act its operations were extended

throughout Scotland, where it concentrated on the provision of social housing in large cities and overspill estates. Between 1946 and 1953 it contributed 12.5 to 17.5 per cent of annual house completions in Scotland and by 1970 it was the second largest public sector landlord in Scotland with a stock of some 80,000 houses. The Scottish Special Housing Association continued in operation until 1989 when its properties were transferred to a new body, Scottish Homes, which was committed to disposal of them to other landlords.

The decline in the quality and quantity of local authority provision, begun in the 1950s and temporarily halted by attempts to revitalise public housing production in the early 1960s, accelerated in the 1970s with consequent increased residualization of the local authority stock. New house completions have fallen (Table 7) and, partly as a response to the problems of high-rise corporation estates, policy has switched to rehabilitation and housing renewal in the inner city. Thus the 1969 and 1974 Housing Acts increased improvement grants and introduced schemes such as General Improvement Areas (1969) and Housing Action Areas (1974) in which local authorities would target housing improvement. However, this shift of emphasis to the inner city has not helped those in most housing need. The supply of low-cost social housing has not kept pace with demand and the problems of tenants living on peripheral estates have not been adequately met.⁶⁶

The problems of building and managing a peripheral housing estate in the context of changing policy priorities can be illustrated by a case study from Merseyside.⁶⁷ Liverpool continued to experience acute housing shortages in the post-war period, exacerbated by high rates of unemployment in a low-wage economy. Much of the population could not afford to move into home ownership and was thus dependent on the local authority for housing improvement.

Tenants displaced by massive slum-clearance schemes were variously rehoused in inner-city high-rise redevelopments (such as Everton), in satellite estates (such as Kirkby, Netherley and Halewood), and in new towns such as Skelmersdale.

The Netherley estate, begun in the late 1960s, was one of the last major housing developments on Merseyside. Built to house people moved from the south dock area (the Dingle), the estate was poorly located with no local employment and poor communications to the city centre. The forbidding five-storey slab blocks had construction problems and rapidly required expensive maintenance which the corporation could not afford. The estate quickly acquired a bad reputation with a high concentration of problem tenants, and was shunned by those who could gain better accommodation. Less than a decade after the estate was completed the corporation was already moving families out of Netherley and rehousing them in local authority homes elsewhere on Merseyside. The slab blocks have now been demolished at massive cost to local tax payers (Plate 7).

Throughout Britain, corporation housing has increasingly become a residual housing tenure, providing homes for only the very poor and, especially, the homeless and others with no alternative form of accommodation. This process can be traced back to the 1930s, and was exacerbated from the mid-1950s onwards. Moreover, policies of the Conservative governments since 1979 have finally confirmed the inferior status of council housing, and have led to a wholesale retreat from local authority housing provision.⁶⁸ The 1980 Housing Act gave a strong political and financial impetus to the right of tenants to buy council houses (a policy which was not in itself new) and led to the sale of around one million council homes in England and Wales in the decade after 1979. The policy of improvement rather than redevelopment was continued, but

linked to a series of measures to encourage the growth of the private sector (especially owner occupation) and to restrict the expenditure of local authorities. Thus local councils which recognised the need for housing investment were frustrated by central government, leading to clashes between ideologically opposed national and local politicians, most notably in Liverpool where housing continued to be a central political issue.

The 1988 Housing Act consolidated these policies.⁶⁹ Not only was the private sector further encouraged, with particular attempts to revitalise the privately-rented sector (to the detriment of most tenants), but also

local authority housing expenditure was further curbed and various measures were used to transfer the control of large corporation estates to housing associations or private landlords. Previous lack of investment in corporation housing, linked to the failure of past housing policy, was in effect used to support an ideological conviction about the superiority of the private sector, and hence discredit local authority housing. In less than a century the history of local authority housing in Britain has come full circle and, although local authorities still manage almost five million dwellings, corporation involvement in new housing production has been reduced almost to the level it was at prior to 1919.



Plate 7: Suburban council flats in Liverpool: the Netherley estate. These large blocks of council flats, built on the periphery of the city, were completed in the early 1970s, but when photographed in 1982 they were already falling into disrepair. They have since been demolished.

Sources and questions for the study of local authority housing

(a) Introduction

Any study must begin with a series of research questions: what do we need to know and why is it important to examine these ideas? The development of hypotheses should come from a sound knowledge of the existing literature from which debates and knowledge gaps can be identified. The preceding sections have attempted to provide an introduction to this literature from which relevant research questions and hypotheses may be generated. Although historical research should not be source driven (research questions should determine the sources, rather than sources determining the questions) it is, however, necessary to know what sources are available and which questions are capable of being answered. There is little point in formulating complex research hypotheses if it is then impossible to examine and test them.

This section attempts to outline the main sources that are available for the study of corporation housing in Britain, relating these sources to a series of general research questions that might be investigated. The main focus of discussion is on local sources that are available for the study of corporation housing in particular places. Although some relevant information is available in national archives, particularly the Ministry of Health files in the Public Record Office which contain correspondence between local and national government officials and comments on actions taken in particular localities, or from various Royal Commissions on housing (published as Parliamentary Papers), local sources are likely to yield most information. Moreover, whereas the national history of the

development of housing policy is quite well-researched, there remains considerable scope for local studies which can demonstrate the diversity of experiences in different parts of the country.

(b) Finding out what was built, when and where

Although the explanation and interpretation of process should be the aim of historical research, most studies will begin with some basic description. We need to know what was happening before it is possible to explain why it was occurring and what significance events had. The enumeration of how much council housing was built by a particular local authority, where and when it was built, and what it looked like is not entirely straightforward. It is however a necessary pre-requisite of any local study. Even a good knowledge of what currently exists on the ground is not sufficient, as some council housing will have been demolished, and it is not always possible to identify corporation housing which has since been sold into private ownership.

The facts of corporation housing development in any locality can be pieced together from a variety of sources. The publications of local councils often provide a good starting point. For instance, in 1951 Liverpool Corporation published a booklet celebrating the city's record of housing provision in which a quite detailed record of the development of different estates was given.⁷⁰ Even where there are no published sources (usually available in local history libraries) it is worth contacting the housing department

of the local council. They may have unpublished lists or accounts of the growth of the council housing stock which can provide a starting point for research. The (usually small) libraries of local housing departments also sometimes contain useful dissertations on local topics undertaken by staff completing their housing management qualifications.

It is unlikely that the publications and records of local housing departments will immediately yield all the information that is needed. There may be gaps in the record, inconsistencies that need resolving, and insufficient information about the date, style and location of housing developments. Such gaps must be filled by trawling through other local sources. If you are fortunate there may be one-off sources, such as a special housing census, that can provide a snapshot of housing development at a particular point in time. Thus, for instance, in response to the Ministry of Health's requirement that local corporations provide an assessment of housing need, Carlisle corporation undertook a full census of housing in 1917.⁷¹ This provides details of housing tenure, size, amenities and some characteristics of tenants. However, such sources are rare and, at best, give a snapshot that cannot be repeated for other time periods.

Rate books also provide cross-sectional information on the location and tenure of property. In theory, they list all property (by street) including the owner, valuation, and some details of occupiers. In most districts rate books were compiled annually and surviving books are usually found in County Record Offices, although some may still be in the possession of particular District Councils. However, the survival rate of rate books is highly variable, with good runs in some districts but none in others. Due to their bulk they were often disposed of by

local authorities or, in some cases, a sample was retained: typically every tenth year to coincide with the census. Rate books can also be very time-consuming to analyse, but they are one of the few sources that can indicate the detailed tenurial composition of a town at a particular date.⁷²

All the above sources provide snapshots of the housing stock at a particular time. Such cross-sectional information cannot provide precise details of when a house was built. To fill in such gaps for corporation housing the detailed progress of local authority building has to be traced through corporation records. All decisions to acquire land and build new local authority housing were approved by the local council and recorded in council minutes. These are normally available in local history libraries, usually with an index which makes the location of relevant entries relatively easy. However, even this source is not foolproof. The fact that a decision was taken to build a block of properties does not mean that they were constructed immediately (or even at all). Sometimes this can be checked by referring to Annual Reports of the local Medical Officer of Health. By the late-nineteenth century most authorities had appointed a Medical Officer and he usually reported on the state of housing in a town, including corporation activity in slum-clearance and house construction. One duty of the Medical Officer was to report to the council on insanitary dwellings and recommend properties for clearance. Annual reports thus often contain detailed statistics on both slum clearance and rebuilding.

Information gained from all the above sources has to be linked to detailed topographic knowledge gained from map evidence (usually a combination of contemporary maps and plans and a modern gazetteer), and field evidence. It is often quite a time-consuming task to piece

together all the evidence to ascertain exactly when and where particular property was built. Visual evidence for houses still in existence must be supplemented with original plans — often included in council reports of corporation building — and photographic evidence. Old photographs are obviously essential for property that has been demolished, but they may also be used to discover later changes that have been made to corporation property. Many local history libraries have very good photograph collections and some district housing departments have a policy of making a photographic record of all properties prior to demolition.

(c) Exploring policy debates and decisions

There is often a large difference between what a council intended to happen and what actually took place. Whether you start with the policy debates or with the results on the ground, there is need to compare intentions with reality. Information about policy objectives and the reactions that they stimulated can come from a number of directions. These include councillors themselves, local government officers who implemented council decisions, informed local commentators, representatives of national government who may comment on or disapprove of local policy, and the local population including the tenants of corporation houses. This latter group will be considered in detail in the next section. There are a large number of potential research questions about how and why policy was developed, and concerning the interactions between local authorities and central government.

In addition to the main council minutes, which recorded decisions about council housing policy, most authorities also had a

series of sub-committees which often left much more illuminating minutes and reports. In the nineteenth century housing and health were usually dealt with together so that housing issues may have been considered by a local Sanitary Committee or, as in the case of a large city like Liverpool, a special committee which dealt with Insanitary Property and Artizans' Dwellings. In the twentieth century most authorities with a substantial housing programme had a separate housing committee, and sometimes additional sub-committees to deal with issues such as housing allocations and arrears. Whilst full council minutes are usually printed and fully indexed, smaller committees and sub-committees may only leave hand-written records. All such sources should be found in local history libraries or County Record Offices, although for the recent past they will be retained by the local district council.

The problem with all committee minutes is that they are inevitably selective. Their main purpose is to record the outcome of a debate and not the full arguments that constituted that discussion. Thus although decisions were recorded, together with key points and sometimes information on how councillors voted, the details of why people voted in a particular way were not noted. More information on the controversies that surrounded corporation policy can be gained from other sources. Although the Medical Officer of Health was an employee of the council, and directly involved in the formulation of housing policy, he did not always agree with council decisions. These disagreements and debates over council policy sometimes came through in the Medical Officer's Annual Reports. For instance, Medical Officers and Councillors were often at loggerheads over the relative importance of slum-clearance linked to central rebuilding and suburban housing programmes. The Annual Reports of Medical

Officers of Health can usually be found in local history libraries or County Record Offices, sometimes bound in with council minutes.

Unofficial documents usually give much freer rein to individual feelings, and local newspapers, magazines and other publications often give fresh insights into local debates. In the pages of such sources councillors may give vent to views that they did not express, or were not recorded, in council meetings; corporation officers and housing officials may make comments that did not find their way into other sources, and local commentators may offer their views on council policy (or the lack of it). Thus in the early-twentieth century there was a vigorous debate in the Liverpool press about the provision of artisans' dwellings by the corporation, with local clergy criticising councillors for what they called glorified slums.⁷³ Such sources are normally available in local history libraries, although newspapers can be time-consuming (if interesting) sources to scan through to find small amounts of relevant information.

Sometimes local authorities took policy decisions that gained national attention and thus comments and criticisms appeared on a larger stage. Some especially innovative housing schemes were profiled in national journals such as *The Builder*, for instance the construction of the first corporation housing (St. Martin's cottages) by Liverpool corporation gained extensive coverage in the late-1860s,⁷⁴ and some activity drew the attention of national government. Evidence to Royal Commissions on housing and correspondence between local councils and the Ministry of Health can be quite revealing about local circumstances and debates. All such information can be found at the Public Record Office, but often copies of relevant evidence also exist in local record offices.

For the inter-war period and after, those involved in policy decisions are likely to be alive. The use of oral history to interview past councillors, housing officials and others concerned with the determination of housing policy can be especially revealing.⁷⁵ However, it is not always easy to locate such people as they may now be scattered in many different locations. The best strategy is probably to try to link into a network of past council employees or councillors and exploit that to establish a list of potential interviewees. Such data collection should probably also come after you have a good working knowledge of the written evidence, so that oral sources can be used to fill in gaps and probe issues that are not fully revealed in the official record.

(d) Discovering who lived in corporation housing

Information on the characteristics of tenants of corporation housing is particularly hard to locate and analyse. Hence the relatively large number of studies of housing policy, but the comparative dearth of work on tenants. However, full appreciation of the impact of corporation housing policies requires appraisal of the characteristics of tenants and the ways in which these changed over time. In particular, we need to know the extent to which certain social, occupational, age or familial groups were selected (and especially whether some groups were disadvantaged), the mobility of tenants within the corporation sector and between housing tenures, the extent to which particular estates developed distinctive tenant profiles, and the problems that tenants faced in new corporation housing.

Summary statistics on the characteristics of tenants in particular blocks or estates is sometimes given in reports to the city

council or in the Medical Officer's Annual Report. These usually relate to specific issues of concern, such as high mortality and crowding in some corporation housing in the 1930s, or to specific policy issues. Thus in the 1890s Liverpool corporation produced quite detailed profiles of the occupants of its Artisans' Dwellings to support its declared policy of providing homes for those displaced from the slums.⁷⁶ However, such sources can only provide an aggregate summary and give no clues to the characteristics, experiences or feelings of individual tenants.

The main sources of documentary information on individual tenants are the records held by individual housing departments. These are not public documents, and they contain confidential details of individuals. However, by approaching the relevant Director of Housing, it is often possible to gain access to such sources for academic research. A guarantee that the information is required purely for research purposes and that individual identities will not be revealed will have to be given. Even then Housing Officers may legitimately refuse access to the files because of confidentiality, lack of space to allow a researcher access, or any other reason.

The ways in which individual housing records are organized vary from one authority to another. Most commonly they take the form of either housing records, (organized by individual properties) or tenant records (organized by individual families). Some authorities may have both systems, some only one, and others may swap between systems over time. Yet other authorities may have developed a hybrid system.

Typically, housing records consist of a series of cards on which details of all tenants are recorded sequentially for a given property.

In theory, this provides a complete record of sequent occupancy of a house from the date it was first occupied to the present day. The amount of information on each tenant varies, but usually includes full information about the age, marital status, occupation and possibly income of the household head, some details of the rest of the family, and sometimes information on the previous address of the tenant. The main difficulty with these data is that they refer only to tenants when they first entered a property. Details are not usually updated as family structures and occupations change, and thus the tenant's characteristics are frozen in time.

Tenants' records, as their name implies, usually consist of files on individual tenants. Again this provides information mainly relating to the time at which a tenant entered council accommodation, but has the advantage that the record follows the housing career of a family whilst it stays within the local authority sector. In addition to basic demographic and socio-economic information on tenants, the file may contain copies of correspondence between the council and a tenant, thus shedding light on issues such as property maintenance, rent arrears and other matters of concern to either the council or the tenant. In terms of analysis the housing records are easiest to use, in that they come in a standardized form, but individual tenants' files can yield more qualitative information.

In addition to problems of access, the survival of such documents also varies. Where a property is still standing, and is managed by the council, housing records should be retained; but where houses have been demolished, sold to sitting tenants or to another landlord the records may have been destroyed. Likewise, tenants' files will exist for all current tenants, but information on those who have died or moved out

of council accommodation may have been removed. Further problems can occur when councils update their records, possibly discarding what they consider to be out-of-date information and concentrating only on current circumstances. This is a particular problem as housing records have become computerised: only current details are likely to be entered onto the database and paper records may be discarded. The amount of information contained in such records where they do survive is vast, and research into them is time-consuming and should not be entered into lightly, but they do contain potentially unique insights into the lives of past tenants of corporation housing.

The very nature of corporation tenants, drawn mostly from the poorer and less articulate members of society, means that they are likely to have left few other records, but occasional accounts of life in local authority estates do emerge. Often these are incorporated into contemporary social surveys, such as those conducted quite widely in the 1930s by a range of institutions and individuals.⁷⁷ For the more recent past it may also be possible to identify and interview current and former tenants of corporation housing. All the usual problems of carrying out oral research apply,⁷⁸ but by carefully selecting a range of tenants from different types of property it is often possible to gain genuine insights into life in local authority housing from the inter-war period. In conjunction with the reminiscences of housing managers such information can also shed light on the relationship between the corporation as a landlord and individual tenants.

(e) Assessing the quality of life of corporation tenants

One key question, which remains difficult to assess, relates to the extent to which the

provision of corporation housing improved the lives and living conditions of the population. Much of the above information drawn from Housing Department files on individual houses and families, oral evidence, personal accounts, Medical Officers' reports, newspaper articles and other sources goes some way towards answering this question. But often it is unsatisfactory. There are two related problems that should be addressed.

First, assessment of whether corporation housing provision improved the quality of life for working-class families requires consideration of what was happening in other sectors of the housing market at the same time. For instance, although slum-clearance and rehousing schemes in the 1890s may have provided improved housing for some dispossessed families, many others were worse off as their homes were destroyed and they were forced to crowd into a declining privately-rented housing stock. Second, few of the sources record an individual's complete housing career. Memory permitting, this can be gained from oral evidence, but most other sources are either cross-sectional, or relate only to a family's progress through the local authority housing stock. Until the relatively recent past, few individuals spent their entire life in council housing. Ideally, for any given family, we should be able to compare housing conditions longitudinally at different points in their life.

There were particular points in time when local authorities or Medical Officers became especially concerned about the quality of corporation housing. Analysis of council minutes and health reports will reveal periodic panics about overcrowding and high mortality in council property, especially inner-city tenements. During the inter-war years, in particular, Medical Officers were quite keen to compare

mortality rates in different classes of corporation property with those in the private sector. The Housing Act of 1935 also required all councils to survey the extent of overcrowding in working-class housing in their district. One upshot of this survey was the disturbing fact that in many areas levels of overcrowding in council property were higher than those in the private sector. The council as landlord was often breaking its own regulations on overcrowding. Given the small size of much council property, and the reluctance of families to move as they expanded in size due to the high rent of larger property, this result is not surprising. But it does suggest that the corporation was not always providing adequate accommodation for its tenants.⁷⁹ Aggregate results from the overcrowding surveys were returned to the Ministry of Health, but at the local level reports contained within council papers can provide a large amount of statistical information on housing quality in 1935.

(f) Conclusion: housing and society

This discussion of sources, and the questions they may answer, has necessarily focused on corporation housing policy and on council tenants. In conclusion it should be emphasized that a proper understanding of any housing sector demands that analysis should also be placed within the context of wider economy and society. Housing is central, not only to the lives of individuals for whom a house is also a

home, but also to the functioning of broader social, economic and political systems.

Thus housing finance is closely linked to trends within the national economy and to the relative attractiveness of other forms of investment. Housing policy at both the national and local level is linked to perceptions not only of housing need, but also of the political impact and timeliness of intervention. The attractiveness of council housing to individual families is related to both the economic attractiveness of alternative housing tenures, and the social and psychological forces that have shaped society.

The study of housing in general, and of corporation housing in particular, thus has relevance for a wide range of issues of central concern to the social and economic historian. Much of the history of modern society is reflected in the history of local authority housing provision. As the twentieth century ends we live in a society where notions of welfare have been redefined and where there has been a wholesale retreat from local authority housing provision. However, housing problems and housing poverty have not disappeared. Understanding of the development of corporation housing in the past, may help to work towards the construction of contemporary housing policies in which the provision of social housing for those in most need again features high on the political agenda.

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Appendix

TABLE 1: HOUSING TENURE IN BRITAIN, 1914-1991 (percentage)

Year	Owner occupied	Public rented	Private rented	Other tenures*
1914	10.0	1.0	80.0	9.0
1938	25.0	10.0	56.0	9.0
1951	29.0	18.0	45.0	8.0
1961	41.0	26.0	27.0	6.0
1971	50.5	30.6	— 18.8 —	
1981	56.0	31.5	8.5	4.0
1991	66.3	21.5	7.1	5.1

*Includes housing occupied by virtue of employment and Housing Association tenure.

Sources: various including *Boddy, M. The building societies* (Macmillan, 1980) p. 154; Census of England and Wales and Census of Scotland, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991. See also *Pooley, C.G. (ed.) Housing strategies in Europe* (Leicester University Press, 1992) p. 84. All figures before 1961 are estimates.

TABLE 2: OVERCROWDING* IN SELECTED TOWNS IN 1891

Town	Total tenements	% of all tenements with only one room	% of one-room tenements overcrowded*	% of all tenements with less than five rooms overcrowded*
London	937,606	18.4	32.8	23.1
<i>(Marylebone)</i>	34,940	32.3	31.7	27.8
<i>(Shoreditch)</i>	28,818	29.1	37.8	30.4
<i>(Bethnal Green)</i>	27,998	23.4	44.6	32.0
<i>(Whitechapel)</i>	14,257	32.1	52.7	31.8
<i>(St. Giles)</i>	9,072	33.6	39.5	31.8
Liverpool	104,890	7.7	35.2	18.3
Manchester	103,720	1.6	30.4	10.0
Birmingham	98,219	1.4	15.0	15.2
Leeds	78,779	1.4	45.2	16.3
Bristol	48,140	8.9	19.9	13.0
Bradford	46,408	2.5	39.6	18.9
Newcastle	37,942	13.2	57.5	34.8
Portsmouth	33,984	4.0	10.0	4.8
Cardiff	25,353	2.3	14.7	9.2

Directly comparable figures are not available for Scottish towns. However, in Glasgow in 1891 33.4% of families each lived in only one room, 50.4% of families living in one room were overcrowded*, and 45.2% of all families were overcrowded*. In Edinburgh 22.8% of families each lived in one room, 35.6% of families living in one room were overcrowded*, and 25.7% of all families were overcrowded.*

*Overcrowding is defined as having more than two persons per room.

Sources: Census of England and Wales, 1891; Census of Scotland, 1891.

TABLE 3: SUMMARY OF PRINCIPAL NATIONAL LEGISLATION INFLUENCING THE PROVISION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING

<u>Date</u>	<u>Act</u>	<u>Principal intended effects</u>
1851	Lodging Houses Act (Shaftesbury Act)	Permitted local authorities (LAs) to purchase land and erect lodging houses
1866	Labouring Classes' Dwelling Houses Act	Permitted LAs to borrow funds for the purchase of sites and erection of dwellings for the labouring classes
1868	Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act (Torrens Act)	Encouraged clearance of insanitary property, but no provision for rebuilding by the LA.
1875	Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvements Act (Cross Act)	Permitted LAs to clear insanitary areas and to build labourers' dwellings for later resale.
1890	Housing of the Working Classes Act	Extended previous legislation allowing LAs to erect 'lodging houses' which included labourers' dwellings.
1909	Housing and Town Planning Act	Removed previous requirements on LAs to sell dwellings within ten years.
1919	Housing Act (Addison Act)	LAs required to survey housing need and provide housing. Losses beyond one penny rate to be borne by the Exchequer.
1923	Housing Act (Chamberlain Act)	Reduced subsidies available to LAs who could only build if they could convince the Minister that this was preferable to private building.
1924	Housing Act (Wheatley Act)	LAs no longer had to prove that their building did not compete with private enterprise.
1930	Housing Act (Greenwood Act)	LAs required to produce a plan for dealing with slum clearance and to house those displaced by slum clearance schemes. Subsidies available for slum clearance.

1933	Housing Act	Wheatley subsidies repealed.
1935	Housing Act	LAs required to survey overcrowding. Extra subsidies for schemes in which it was necessary to build flats.
1936	Housing Act	LAs empowered to sell council houses.
1938	Housing Act	Uniform subsidies established for slum clearance and overcrowding.
1944	Housing Act	£150m. made available for manufacture and erection of temporary housing by LAs.
1946	Housing Act	Standard annual subsidy of £16 10s per house provided over 60 years, with extra subsidies for flats and other high-cost construction by LAs.
1949	Housing Act	Enabled LAs to provide housing for any member of the community, not just the working classes.
1952	Housing Act	Standard annual subsidy to LA housing increased to £26 14s. plus a rate subsidy of £8 18s.
1954	Housing Repairs and Rents Act	LAs required to estimate the size of their slum problem and submit to the Minister proposals for dealing with it. New standards of housing fitness established.
1956	Housing Subsidies Act	Subsidies for general-needs housing provided by LAs substantially reduced to £10 per annum, basic subsidies for slum-clearance schemes reduced slightly but much larger subsidies for high-rise developments.
1961	Housing Act	System of housing subsidies revised. General-needs and slum-clearance housing to receive the same subsidy of £24 per dwelling if other financial criteria met.
1967	Housing subsidies Act	Subsidies again revised to help LAs deal with high interest rates. Additional subsidy for LA buildings above six storeys abolished.
1969	Housing Act	Increased improvement grants and the introduction of General Improvement Areas (GIAs) placed the emphasis on rehabilitation rather than slum clearance.

1972	Housing Finance Act	Housing subsidies to LAs were reduced, and at the same time rent levels rose as the 'fair rents' policy was extended to the public sector.
1974	Housing Act	Increased improvement grants and introduced Housing Action Areas (HAAs).
1975	Housing Rents and Subsidies Act.	Increased subsidies for LA housing and 'fair rents' concepts abandoned. LAs could charge 'reasonable' rents based on historic costs.
1977	Housing (Homeless Persons) Act	LAs have a statutory duty to provide housing for certain categories of homeless.
1980	Housing Act	Increased central government control of LA housing expenditure; increased LA rents and introduced statutory right of tenants to buy their council housing with substantial discounts.
1984	Housing and Building Control Act	Increased and extended effects of right to buy legislation.
1986	Housing and Planning Act	Increased discounts on flats to encourage tenants of inner-city high rise blocks to exercise their right to buy.
1988	Housing Act	LAs to become 'enablers' rather than providers of social housing. LA control of housing weakened by establishment of Housing Action Trusts to rehabilitate and manage problem LA estates, and by voluntary transfer of housing from LAs to other landlords, especially Housing Associations.

The above legislation applies to England and Wales. In most cases similar but separate legislation was enacted in Scotland. See *Rodger, R. (ed.) Scottish housing in the twentieth century* (Routledge, 1989) pp.238-45.

For further details on the effects of the legislation see *Merrett, S. State housing in Britain* (Routledge, 1979) and *Balchin, P. Housing policy: an introduction* (Routledge, 3rd edition, 1995).

TABLE 4: SLUM CLEARANCE AND BUILDING IN LIVERPOOL, 1876-1940.

Years	Houses erected (a)	Houses demolished (b)	Ratio of (a) to (b)	% of houses erected built by corporation*
1876-1880	11,567	1,130	10.2	0.0
1881-1885	6,704	3,099	2.2	4.0
1886-1890	3,176	1,844	1.7	0.0
1891-1895	1,787	4,276	0.4	5.7
1896-1900	8,683	3,975	2.2	0.5
1901-1905	10,837	2,813	3.9	12.4
1906-1910	10,504	2,496	4.2	4.3
1911-1915	4,212	2,024	2.1	11.3
1916-1920	496	439	1.1	62.9
1921-1925	8,122	496	16.4	73.3
1926-1930	20,337	890	22.9	68.1
1931-1935	19,805	1,213	16.1	43.1
1936-1940	16,249	4,561	3.6	56.6

*Includes corporation houses erected outside the city boundary.

Source: Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health (Liverpool). See also *Pooley, C.G. and Irish, S. The development of corporation housing in Liverpool, 1869-1945* (Lancaster University, Centre for NW Regional Studies, 1984).

TABLE 5: OCCUPATIONS OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS IN SELECTED ARTIZANS' AND LABOURERS' DWELLINGS IN LIVERPOOL, 1904 (%)

Occupational category (selected)	Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings			
	Gildarts Gardens	Dryden Street	Adlington Street	Hornby Street
Building worker	1.5	4.5	1.6	0.8
Metal/machine manufacture	2.5	1.1	2.0	4.7
Hawker	4.1	5.0	10.8	2.3
Dock labourer	25.8	27.8	18.1	20.2
Dock porter	1.5	1.7	5.0	2.3
Warehouseman	0.0	1.7	0.8	0.8
General labourer	22.7	24.4	18.9	27.9
Railway worker	0.5	1.1	0.0	0.0
Carter	8.1	10.0	6.2	12.4
Municipal service	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.0
Domestic service	7.6	3.3	5.8	2.3
Total household heads	198	180	260	129

Source: Annual Report of the Manager of Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings (Liverpool, 1904). See also *Pooley, C.G. and Irish, S. The development of corporation housing in Liverpool, 1869-1945* (Lancaster University, Centre for NW Regional Studies, 1984).

**TABLE 6: CHARACTERISTICS OF TENANTS OF SELECTED LOCAL
AUTHORITY HOUSING IN INTER-WAR LIVERPOOL**

	House type			
	Suburban 5-room house (1919 Act)	Suburban 4-room house (1924 Act)	Suburban 4-room house (1930 Act)	Inner-city tenement (1930 Act)
Mean number of rooms in previous residence	5.4	4.3	2.4	1.9
Mean weekly rent paid in previous residence	73.5p	52.9p	30.0p	25.5p
Mean weekly total household income	£4.59	£3.27	£2.96	£2.50
Mean household size	4.1	4.6	4.9	5.2
% of household heads employed on docks	4.0	11.0	27.0	30.0
% of household heads employed by corporation	17.0	16.4	7.0	3.0
% of households moving due to slum clearance	0.0	1.7	78.6	81.2
Total sample size*	473	1,418	182	213

*Data relate to all tenants in a sample of local authority estates, 1919-1945.

For sources and details of sample see *Pooley, C.G. and Irish, S. The development of corporation housing in Liverpool, 1869-1945* (Lancaster University, Centre for NW Regional Studies, 1984).

**TABLE 7: THE PRODUCTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSES 1945-1990
(DWELLINGS STARTED IN SELECTED YEARS)**

Year	Houses started by Local Authorities (000s)	Local Authority house starts as % of all new house construction.
1946	163.5	-
1950	169.2	82.9
1955	164.6	52.6
1960	112.9	36.5
1965	163.9	41.8
1970	131.5	41.2
1975	133.7	41.4
1980	41.5	26.7
1985	22.0	11.2
1990	8.6	5.3

Local Authority house starts peaked at 231,001 in 1953.

Sources: *Merrett, S. State housing in Britain* (Routledge, 1979) pp. 320-21; *Balchin, P. Housing policy: an introduction* (Routledge, 1995) pp. 32-3.



Local authority housing has been a distinctive feature of the British housing system throughout the twentieth century. This pamphlet outlines the development of local authority housing in Britain from its origins in the late nineteenth century to the present day, focusing on the ways in which policy changes have affected both the structure and the availability of accommodation for those in most housing need. It is argued that the contemporary residualization of council housing, and the retreat from local authority housing provision which has occurred in the late twentieth century, can more effectively be understood within an historical context. Sources available for the analysis of local authority housing provision at the local level are examined and related to key questions for investigation. The pamphlet will be of interest to all students of housing history and to local historians keen to discover more about housing in particular places.